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Contras Fail to Make Field Gains

Nicaraguans, Expecting the Worst After New U.S. Aid, Find Calm

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua—An unexpected calm prevails in this capital, and much of this nation, during the holidays.

Many Nicaraguans anticipated that by this Christmas season they would be surrounded by firefights between government troops and U.S.-backed rebels, known as contras, in the aftermath of U.S. congressional approval of \$100 million in new aid for the contras in October.

But the contras, numbering no more than 14,000, have not made any conspicuous impact in the field against the Sandinistas' combined regular and militia forces of about 150,000 since the aid was approved. Of the new aid, \$70 million is for military gear.

The contras rounded out the year without carrying off any operation that fired the widespread anti-Sandinista spirits in Nicaragua, or significantly damaged Sandinista positions. Contra commanders said logistics and a severe shortage of military equipment prevented them from maintaining fighters in Nicaragua's mountains in the final months of a two-year cut-off of U.S. aid.

As a result, the Sandinistas' claims to have crushed the contras seemed more plausible to Nicaraguans by the end of 1986.

"It is only a matter of months before the mercenary forces will feel they are totally disbanded," boasted Defense Minister Gen. Humberto Ortega at a recent press conference, using the Sandinistas' standard deprecating phrase for the contras.

The CIA, now in charge of the day-to-day logistics of the aid delivery, has moved ponderously,

hampered by bureaucratic tangles, said U.S. officials and frustrated contra leaders in the region.

Many rebels of the Honduras-based Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), which includes about 10,000 fighters, are penned into a small triangle of hilly turf in southern Honduras where most of their camps are located. From there, they are able to steal back into Nicaragua only in small groups. About 3,000 Sandinista infantrymen, backed by Soviet field artillery, rocket launchers and helicopter gunships, set up blocking patrols along the border—a "wall of weapons," according to one Latin military expert.

"The water in which the fish swam is now contaminated with Sandinistas," said Ortega, recasting a maxim of the late Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-tung. "The mercenaries will drown in it."

The contras are under pressure on their rear guard from Honduran authorities who blocked them from fanning out along the border to seek advantageous crossing points, and now demand that they move their base camps into Nicaragua in coming months. Diplomatic observers familiar with the situation at the border said the contras would have to tie up a major part of their resources to defend a fixed campsite inside Nicaragua.

In Nicaragua's south-central province of Chontales, the FDN's rugged Jorge Salazar Task Force badgered the Sandinistas consistently since mid-1985. But after a secret arms resupply flight was shot down over the area Oct. 5 and its American pilot and co-pilot killed, only one other weapons drop has succeeded, contra and U.S. officials said.

The Sandinista Army in mid-November threw in additional light counterinsurgency battalions to keep the Salazar units, low on ammunition, on the run. "They could just dog those people to death," said one U.S. official in Central America.

The Defense Ministry said that slightly more than 1,000 Sandinista soldiers were killed in combat in 1986. It placed contra deaths at 4,000. Latin and European military observers estimated that contra losses were at least equal to the Sandinistas' in 1986, for the second year in a row.

In any guerrilla war in which the insurgents are gaining strength, the casualties of the standing government forces are normally much higher, they noted.

In 1986, the rebels did their best fighting in more conventional, defensive combat on Honduran soil, observers said. When more than 1,000 Sandinista troops stormed the border in March to destroy a guerrilla training school, contra units maneuvered behind them, cutting them off and killing and wounding many dozens.

Military experts in several Central American countries worry that the contras may have waited too long in their base camps without fighting to be able to recover the combined military and political momentum that guerrillas need to attract and keep the loyalty of a cautious civilian population.